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by W. H. Bishop
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THE LOBSTER AT HOME.

In the spring, the lobster, who has passed the winter months in deep water, returns again inshore. He has found the deep water both tranquil and warm, while the shallower expanses near land have been troubled to the bottom by furious gales and chilled by the drifting ice. Thirty fathoms is a very fair depth for his winter home, while in summer the trap in which he is generally captured gathers in a goodly number if sunk in a depth of five fathoms, or even less. A few lobsters burrow in the mud and in a manner hibernate, but
A Lobsterman’s Home and Implements.

The ordinary aspect of those taken in winter shows that their habits at this time differ little from what they are at any other. The migratory impulse seizes upon all about the same moment, and they come in in regular columns, the stronger members in the front, the weaker in the rear; and though there is hardly a more quarrelsome animal, whether at large or in a state of captivity, than the lobster, they postpone, for the time, the manifestation of their habitual temper.

A straight line of sea-coast furnishes but a limited area of feeding-ground for the lobster, even should it contain the desirable kind of food. The bottom in such a coast gradually shelves for a moderate distance, but presently drops off into deep soundings. An indented coast is much more advantageous. So great a stretch of shoals and shallows as exists along the north-east of New England, from Yarmouth in Maine to Cape Sable, the lower point of Nova Scotia, will hardly be found elsewhere. It presents an endless series of promontories which have barely escaped being islands, and islands which have barely escaped being promontories. With the innumerable resulting bays, coves, sounds, estuaries, and straits, hardly does the water deepen from one shore before it shoals again to another. As a consequence, the Maine coast has become the best lobster-fishing ground in the world, and the industry of taking and introducing the lobster into commerce has extended to great proportions.

The awkward crustacean, when snared, is either sent fresh to market in smacks containing wells, or he is boiled at some central establishment, and sent in open crates, or, finally, he is put up in hermetically sealed cans. The first two processes continue all the year round, but a law of the State of Maine prohibits the canning of lobsters except between the first of March and the first of August. There are various theories about their unsuitability for this purpose after August first. It does not seem to be quite clear whether the law is for the protection of the purchaser, to whom the flesh is said to be at times poisonous, or of the lobster, to prevent its too rapid destruction by indefatigable pursuit.

The typical lobsterman lives at the bottom of a charming and remote cove. The
shores rise in bold, gray crags, but he has a strip of sand on which to beach his boat. He is a fisherman in other branches and a farmer as well, for lobstering need not take the whole of any one's time. His buildings, seen at the top of a rising ground, are weather-beaten gray and red. At the shore he has fish-houses, a great reel on which nets are wound up, and in a cleft of the rock smokes a large iron kettle, wherein is brewing a decoction of tar and rosin for water-proofing the rope-work of his lobster-traps. The traps themselves have the appearance of a pile of mammoth bird-cages. The structure is four feet long, two feet wide, and two feet high, with a semicircular section. It is made of slats, with wide intervals between, to afford the proposed victim a clear view of the baits arranged on a perpendicular row of hooks within. A door opens in the circular top, through which access is had for preparing the baits and removing the contents. The trap is sunk to the bottom by a ballast of stones, and a billet of wood at the other end of the rope serves as a buoy. The ends are closed only with tarred rope-netting, and in one there is a circular opening of considerable size. The bait used is a cod's head, or sometimes a row of cunners.
The lobsterman has, perhaps, one hundred and fifty such traps, set in eligible locations. He visits them every morning, and sometimes the circuit of buoys marked with his name is five or six miles in extent. He lays hold of the submerged rope, covered with a green, beard-like weed, lifts the trap, removes what it contains, and drops it again to the bottom. The occupation presents its most picturesque aspect in winter, when the fishing is in deep water. The lobsterman then, with his dory filled with a pile of the curious cages which he has taken up for repairs or is going to set in new places, ventures far out to sea, often at no little personal risk. Sometimes a particularly violent gale will drive the traps with it, and wreck them in the breakers. One lobsterman on the island of Monhegan lost over fifty in this way in one night.

A mature lobster should measure, without the claws, from one to two feet long, and weigh complete from two to fifteen pounds, but smaller sizes are so common that a length of ten and a half inches, without reference to weight, has been made a standard for certain calculations. It is claimed that the average size, as well as the profits of the business, is being steadily diminished by the industry with which the pursuit has been lately followed up. The shores teem with traps, and the competition is so fierce that whereas a lobsterman once made four or five dollars a day, he now regards himself lucky if he makes but one. Occasional prodigies in size turn up to astonish and delight their captors. Lobsters have been taken as heavy as twenty-five pounds, in a “line” (twenty-eight fathoms) of water. At South Saint George, below Rockland, hangs the claw of a lobster which in life weighed forty-three pounds. At Friendship, not far distant, there is authentic record of a certain white lobster of formidable development. The normal color is black, or greenish-black, turning to vivid scarlet by boiling. The hard shell is incapable of expansion, and, if it were not for a special provision, would prevent all growth. Relief is found in the periodical shedding of the shell. It splits in two along the back, and is sloughed off and replaced in time by a new one formed underneath. This change takes place in many lobsters, though not in all, some time about the first of August, and, undoubt-
perhaps four inches long, and at the end of the fourth hardly more than six. At such a rate of progress it appears that something in the neighborhood of five years must elapse before they attain the length of eight or ten inches, at which size they are first found in a soft condition. Our lobsterman’s theory of longevity is based upon his observation of this slowness of growth.

Fineness of organization would not seem to be the strong point of the lobster any more than beauty of form, yet he moves about his chosen feeding-grounds with a very respectable set of endowments for picking up his living. He has his sense of smell at the base of one pair of his numerous feeler-like antennæ and his sense of hearing at another; his eyes are located at the end of flexible peduncles and have an extended range of observation, and two long, fine antennæ meander cautiously over everything in his vicinity with a delicate sense of touch. His principal power resides in the great pair of anterior claws, which have force sufficient to crack a clam. His prey (clams and mussels, and such fish as the
sculpin, flounder, and cunner) is seized and held fast by the sharp teeth between the thumb-and-finger-like grasp of the larger claw, then held in the duller small one while he sucks away the substance at leisure. His locomotion is very rapid and by preference backward, the cunning peduncle eyes no doubt having first taken the requisite bearings. Curving his many-jointed, wide tail inward, he moves with a velocity for which those who have only seen him in the market-stalls would never give him credit.

Thus equipped, the lobster approaches the trap set for his inveiglement. The dull, big eyes of the cod’s head in the trap stare sagely out at the bloodless victim. The bead-like optics of the lobster, in the flurry of this cold temptation, peer cunningly in. As to the attractiveness of the morsel there can be no question, and the way to reach and take possession of it through the passage in the net-work seems ample. With a few deft strokes he is within. Why does he not return in the same way? Whoever understands the defective logical processes of the lobster’s mind can alone explain. It does not occur to him to turn around, and as to going out forward, the great claws, now spread out, render it difficult, though the opening is in no way more contracted than before. Nor does the fate of one deter the entrance of others. When the trap is lifted it contains from one to a dozen of all sizes, and with them a few “five-fingers” (star-fish), and perhaps a blundering, large-headed sculpin, who is much surprised at being brought so suddenly to light. Whether or not a loss of appetite be occasioned by the discovery of his situation, the lobster does not disturb the baits to any considerable extent. A large one will eat a piece hardly larger than one’s finger, though he may have been in the trap with the bait for hours.

“IT is a cheap-livin’ fish,” a lobsterman tells us, with an air of confidence, almost of giving away the secret of the business. “Nothin’ is ever found inside of him. He kin eat barnacles, sea-weed, mud—anything. He kin live five and six months in the well of a smack on what he finds there, and come out all right,—unless they chaw each other up,” he adds. “They’re most always a-doin’ that. It don’t seem as though it hurt ‘em no gre’t, nuther. You find lots of ‘em with their claws broke off in fights, but they
grow out ag’in jest as good. Some think they lose ’em off in thunderstorms, too. I dunno how that is, but they do say that they’re pretty considerable frightened."

The grip of a lobster’s claw, which can crack a clam easily, is strong enough to take off a man’s finger, and there has even been a story of the death of a Maine hotel-keeper from the clutch of a lobster. The experienced are usually cautious in handling them. At Deer Island, a man told us that he had been caught while opening a trap beside his boat, and held in a most painful position for nearly half an hour, supporting the weight of the trap as well as the weight of his tormentor, who, at last, not being interfered with, let go of his own accord. Another lobster-fisher went ashore with a particularly fine specimen slung over his shoulder, and stopped to scare with it a young girl he met on the way. Inadvertently putting back one of his hands, it was savagely gripped by the dangling claws; the other, hastening to its relief, was seized also, presenting the joker to the object of his attentions in a highly unfavorable light. She was obliged to bring assistants with hammers and knives to break the claws.

For lobster-catching on a smaller scale, two kinds of nets, and a hook with a ten-foot handle not unlike a mackerel-gaff, are occasionally used. One is an ordinary dip-net, lowered by ropes and with a bait in the bottom; when the lobster enters, the additional weight is felt and the net pulled up. The other is a circle of wire, playing in equal halves on an axis; a rope is attached to each side, and it is lowered like the other; by pulling the ropes the parts shut together, inclosing whatever rests within.

The first destination of the captives is the lobster-car. This is a great floating box, perhaps twelve feet long by eight wide, by two and a half deep, submerged to the water’s edge. Here they are preserved till the arrival of the smack. The Portland or Boston or New York smack comes once a week, to carry off the larger ones fresh in its well; the factory smacks come for the smaller ones, to be canned, every day or two. The smack runs down to the lobster-car and luffs up alongside. The owner stands on its slippery surface, and dips out the contents into the iron-bound scoop of a fine large weighing-tackle, rigged to the throat-haliards. The skipper keeps the tally on a shingle. The large, bold implements, the free attitudes, the strongly characteristic dresses, offer the artist plenty of material.

The arrival of the smack is an important event in the cove. The skipper brings the news of the trade and the personal gossip of his circuit, and executes many small commissions for the household. An ordinarily prosperous factory, as that at Green’s Landing, Deer Island, has three such small vessels in its employ, attending upon, perhaps, one hundred and fifty lobstermen in all. The skipper endeavors to attach
to himself his special gang, or clientèle, and to make it as large as possible. To insure that they shall fish for him and no other he uses all the arts of a commercial traveler. He makes a slightly more favorable price here, relies upon an exhibition of jolly good-fellowship there, and again appeals to long-established usage and relations. He must be able, too, to fit a client out here and there on credit with the necessary gear for the campaign. By every means in his power

he assures him that he will not do better with any other living skipper, and begs him not to forget it. His own compensation is sometimes a salary, but more often a commission on the amounts brought in. His cabin is six feet by four, by a height sufficient to stand erect in. It has a couple of bunks with squalid calico quilts on them, a rusty iron stove, and a table-leaf letting down from the foot of the mast, at which he sits casting up his accounts on the shingle—that universal record-book—as he cruises in and out of the small harbors, past the reefs with their singular beacons and the little light-houses of the poorer class.

“Do you see yonder light?” our skipper says, as we sail near South Saint George. “Well, there was a feller appointed keeper from somewheres in the State oncet, what had never see the water afore, I guess—a regular p’litical job. Well, after he’d been there a little there was complaints ag’in him, and he was hauled up before the board.

“’What time do you put your light out?’ says the board.

“’Nine o’clock,’ says this here p’litical keeper. ‘That’s when I turns in myself, and I supposed all decent folks was to hum by that time, or ought to be.’ ”

The smack nowadays runs alongside the wharf of the lobster-factory. From the land side, the first seen of the skipper is a pair of brawny hands on the string-piece. They are followed, as he climbs up the side, by his sou’-wester, his patched woolen round-about, and his cowhide boots covering his trowsers to the knee. The great weighing-scoop is again rigged, a tub, with a rope and stake handle, is lowered from a small crane at the corner of the wharf, the shingle is resumed, and the live freight, clutching and flapping viciously, begins to be as unceremoniously transferred with shovels as though it was only coals.

The lobster-factories are very numerous, and can hardly escape the notice even of the fashionable visitor to Maine. He is confronted by one, for instance, at the landing of Harpswell, the principal island of Casco Bay, another at the historic old town of Castine, another at Southwest Harbor, Mount Desert, besides the one at Green’s Landing. Deer Island has factories at Oceanville and Burnt Cove, forming part of a series, twenty-three in number, which belong to one firm, and stretch all the way
down to the Bay of Fundy. They cannot be called intrinsically inviting, owing to their wholly utilitarian character, although they are apt to have redeeming features in an occasional touch of the picturesque.

The factory opens at one end on the wharf, close to the water. Two men bring in the squirming loads on a stretcher and dump the mass into coppers for boiling. At intervals the covers are hoisted by ropes and pulleys, and dense clouds of steam arise, through which we catch vistas of men, women, and children at work. Two men approach the coppers with stretcher and scoops-nets, and they throw rapid scoopfuls, done to a scarlet, backward over their shoulders. The scarlet hue is seen in all quarters—on the steaming stretcher, in the great heaps on the tables, in scattered individuals on the floor, in a large pile of shells and refuse seen through the open door, and in an ox-cart-load of the same refuse, farther off, which is being taken away for use as a fertilizer.

The boiled lobster is separated, on long tables, into his constituent parts. The meat of the many-jointed tail is thrust out with a punch. A functionary called a "cracker" frees that of the claws by a couple of deft cuts with a cleaver, and the connecting arms are passed on to be picked out with a fork by the girls. In another department, the meat is placed in the cans. The first girl puts in roughly a suitable selection of the several parts. The next weighs it, and adds or subtracts enough to complete the exact amount desired (one or two pounds). The next forces down the contents with a stamp invented especially for the purpose. The next puts in a tin cover with blows of a little hammer. Then a tray is rapidly filled with the cans, and they are carried to the solderers, who seal them tight except for minute openings in the covers, and put them in another tray, which, by means of a pulley-tackle, is then plunged in bath caldrons, in order that the cans may be boiled till the air is expelled from their contents through the minute openings. Then they are sealed up and are boiled again for several hours, when the process of cooking is complete.

In the packing-room the cans are cleaned with acid, painted a thin coat of green to keep them from rusting, pasted with labels displaying a highly ornamental scarlet lobster rampant against a blue sea, and placed by the gross in pine boxes to await the arrival of the company's vessel, which cruises regularly from factory to factory, collecting the product. Nine-tenths of the supply at present goes to the foreign market. On "loaf-days," the hands occupy themselves with making the neat cans which it is their ordinary business to fill.

The solderers, each with his little sheet-iron furnace, bristling with tools, on the table beside him, and the white light of one of a long row of small windows playing over him, give the suggestion of alchemists. Over their heads in a prominent place is a placard: "Notice! How to Preserve Health: Let these Tools alone!!!" There must be a little history of mischief-making attached to this. Who could have interfered with the honest solderers' tools? Could it have been yonder pretty girl, certainly the belle of the lobster-shop? She stands at the end of a long table, in a check apron bound with pink, her arms bare, her brown hair with threads of auburn in it hanging down her back in a braid. She is
of the robuster Yankee type, about which there is no suspicion of consumption. Near her, by the partition, is a disused dory on a heap of coarse salt, which forms a sort of beach for it, and overhead other dorics are sandwiched between the rafters. She is very steady, they tell us, and engaged to a young man who sails in the company's freight-smack; and, indeed, we see him come in, in a linen duster over a suit of ready-made clothes, and shake hands with her and his friends and acquaintances round about. When we ask her if we are at liberty to draw her picture, she says she "don't know as it makes any odds," and is evidently not displeased with the proposition. Still, it appears by a certain nervousness in her manner that it does make "odds," for she inquires presently how check "takes," and after that, inventing a plausible pretext for delay, hurries home and returns with her hair discouragingly smoothed down by wetting, and arranged around the front in crimps.

The solderers are paid from twelve to fifteen dollars a week, ordinary men from seven to ten, and the girls no more than three and a half. Yet even at this price a respectable class of female labor is engaged. Some of the young women have taught school in their time. This is not so remarkable when we say that common report has it that there are towns on this coast where, by the excessive shrewdness of rural committee-men, the wages of school-keeping have been reduced to two dollars a week.

The minor employés are generally gathered from the neighborhood. The more skillful are brought in for the season, and have successive engagements at different points. The solderers are in particularly active demand, owing to the extent to which the business of canning has been extended, and seem to have in their vocation a substantial means of livelihood. The sweet-corn season opens as soon as the lobster season closes, and soon after the first of August the solderers will be found making ready to hurry to the country back of Portland, where corn-canning is an industry of great magnitude.

The corn-factories and lobster-factories are owned to a large extent by the same companies, and one may chance to hear it charged that the lobster-law was procured with special reference to this natural connection of the two crops.

"It aint in the interest of the lobster nor yet of the public, the law aint," said an informant who holds this theory. "They say the meat is p'is'n after such a time, but the smack's keeps on catchin' of 'em up and puttin' in ice all summer—that don't look much like it. The parties wants the sawderers down to Freeport and Gorham for cannin' the corn—that's how it is; and they don't want no one else a-goin' on with lobsters when they aint at it. But what was your object in knowin'?" he interrupts his discourse to ask, not readily conceiving a merely speculative interest in these matters; "was you thinkin' of startin' a lobster-factory?"